THE ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUES OF THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

Published on microfiche by:

Chadwyck-Healey Ltd
21 Bateman Street
Cambridge CB2 1NB
England

Somerset House
417 Maitland Avenue
Teaneck, NJ 07666
USA

Date of publication and production of master: 1976

Series: The purpose of this series to make available those catalogues that have lasting interest through their text or their illustrations. Catalogues and cumulations of titles in the series are available from the publishers.

Serial numbers: Each title is identified by a seven-figure serial number placed in the top right hand corner of the microfiche title strip. The first figure indicates the number of the list in which the title first appears. The first three-figure group signifies the gallery or museum; the second three-figure group the accession number for that title.

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Technical data:

Producing laboratory: Micromedia Ltd, Kidlington, Oxford, England.

Z5055
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McKNIGHT KAUFFER: POSTER ART 1915-1940

A TRAVELLING EXHIBITION ARRANGED BY THE CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT OF THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

V&A

INTRODUCTION

SOUTHAMPTON INSTITUTE

. . . . the artist in advertising is a new kind of being . . . . it is his business constantly to correct values, to establish new ones, to stimulate advertising and help to make it worthy of the civilisation that needs it
E. McKNIGHT KAUFFER 1938

Edward McKnight Kauffer (1890–1954) was indeed a 'new kind of being' in English life between the wars. He created a special position for himself, from which flowed the extraordinarily varied and inventive posters in this exhibition. He was as a dreamer fulfilling a dream – but his career was only possible because he did not dream alone. The creation of these posters depended on a shared belief among certain artists, writers and exceptional clients in the business world that publicity should reflect civilized values. To this ideal Kauffer brought a keen personal instinct for the romantic, a painter's discrimination in colour and pattern – and an American eagerness to Make It New.

E. McKnight Kauffer was born in Great Falls, Montana, in 1890 and grew up in Evansville in the Mid-Western state of Indiana. His early training as a painter was in San Francisco and then at the Art Institute of Chicago. A patron who believed in his potential talent provided funds for Kauffer to study in Paris. He reached Paris in the autumn of 1913 and fell under the spell of the work of Van Gogh. He had already decided that, when his funds eventually ran out, he would support himself in Paris by selling designs for posters – like other struggling young artists. This plan was interrupted by the outbreak of war. Kauffer fled to England. He made designs for textiles and posters and attempted to sell them, while continuing to paint. He associated quickly with the English painters who, like himself, were working from a Post-Impressionist base – the Nash brothers, Harold Gilman, Charles Ginner and Robert Bevan. He worked for a shilling a night in a soldiers' canteen. In 1915 he received his first commission for posters – the landscape posters *In Watford* and *Oxhey Woods* (nos. 1 and 2 in the exhibition). They were commissioned by the Underground Electric Railways Company of London (in 1933 merged with other companies in the London Passenger Transport Board), which had developed since 1908 the most enterprising poster policy in the country. Kauffer exhibited these early posters together with his paintings in his first one-man show in 1916. As a painter he exhibited with the Cumberland Market Group and the London Group, of which he became Secretary in 1917. In the same year Roger Fry devoted a room to Kauffer's water-colours at his 'New Movements in Art' exhibition and kept a portfolio of his drawings for sale at the Omega Workshops. His paintings brought him more reputation than money and he worked with growing concentration on designing poster images for sale to advertisers. In January 1917 his lifetime's best design made its first appearance. It was a flight of birds, published on the monthly Poster Gallery page of the magazine *Colour*, uncaptioned and on offer to any advertiser.

Three years later an improved version of the design was published as a poster by Britain's first socialist daily, the *Daily Herald*, with the legend *Soaring to Success – the Early Bird.* '*Flight*, or the *Early Bird*, epitomizes Kauffer's aspirations as a designer. The design employs the conventions of Cubism with complete understanding and, fusing birds and aeroplanes, is a consummate expression in the new idiom of the persistent symbol of flight as spiritual freedom. To be more exact, the style depends from the English version of Cubism – Vorticism. Furthermore, Kauffer's boldness in offering his revolutionary design for the hoardings can be traced to the same source. Wyndham Lewis had introduced Vorticism at its first exhibition in 1915 as a force which might impinge on the streets in the form of posters: 'Were the streets of London carpeted with abstractions', he had written, 'rather than the present mass of work which falls between two stools, the design usually weakened to explain some point, the effect architecturally would be much better, and the Public taste could thus be educated in a popular way to appreciate the essentials of design better than picture galleries have ever done.' In 1925 Roger Fry, the most influential critic of his day, wrote à propos Kauffer's posters: 'It is surprising what alacrity and intelligence people can show in front of a poster which if it had been a picture in a gallery would have been roundly declared unintelligible.'

Kauffer continued his career as a painter, however, until 1921. In the previous year he had helped to found 'X' Group with Wyndham Lewis, an attempt to continue Vorticism but with an orientation – he hoped – towards graphic design, especially for the film industry. The group collapsed after its first exhibition. In 1921 Kauffer's paintings were shown in Paris in a strong group-show of British painters but now he had found a hypocrisy in making a distinction between 'pure' painting and commissioned work. The decision to abandon easel painting for poster art and the work we now call 'graphic design' cannot have been easy. It was not made in a disillusioned spirit, however, and it actually served to release Kauffer's talent. In his paintings he always remains close to this or that influence. In his posters his decorative inventiveness emerged much more freely, stimulated by specific commissions and the challenge of momentarily transforming the streets. Far from being a painter *manqué*, as some have said, he was a painter who found himself as a special kind of poster artist. He visited New York in 1921 with the intention of establishing himself there as a designer but found no one willing to use his work except Theatre Guild. He marvelled that the fastest city in the world should show only posters of static prettiness. He wrote of himself as designing for the pace of modern city life. 'It seems logical that if I design for a fast moving public, my design must have veracity, brevity and vigour.' But, he went on, 'It is possible to make a fast moving public leisured for a moment. And so after succeeding with veracity, brevity and vigour as an attention force, a longer message can be told with ease and even elegance.' About the same time Kauffer's great French contemporary A. M. Cassandre, was talking of posters as 'machines à annoncer'. Kauffer was inspired by the idea that a poster could become an incident on the street like seeing a fire-engine: 'The fascination the public has for the race of a fire apparatus is mainly colour and movement – the romance of fire is further back of the head. The swift flash of red, the glitter of an engine, the slender arrow of a hook and ladder, make the public feel differently for a few moments, long enough to have fixed a definite impression in the mind.'

Kauffer's public career was the confluence of his own individuality and the belief in him of the clients with whom he saw eye to eye –

these he found in England, not in his native land. Of his clients the greatest was Frank Pick (1878–1941), the man who had given Kauffer his first commission in 1915. That was the start of a relationship in which the Underground (and later the LPTB) became Kauffer's major client and he its major designer. Before his final return to the United States in 1940 Kauffer had designed some 150 posters and car-cards for the company. Poster patronage at the Underground was only one part of Frank Pick's efforts on behalf of improved design. He was a reformer in the line of Ruskin and Morris but without their distrust of the machine. He saw value in sophisticated machinery and what it made possible – and in an aesthetic which would express this. Pick's contribution has been finely described by Christian Barman RDI:

'Not since Wedgwood has an English tradesman done so much to make his trade a spiritual asset to the society on which it feeds. His chief merit was this, that he showed us a new type of business executive, cultured, sensitive, and creative in the highest sense, which modern business will have to produce if our material civilisation is to keep what little of humanity still clings to it.'

Pick was also the creator of the poster campaign of the Empire Marketing Board (see catalogue no. 21) as Chairman of its Poster sub-committee. The brief life of the Board from 1926 to 1933 resulted in a series of posters by such artists as William Nicholson, John and Paul Nash, MacDonald Gill and Austen Cooper, together with the pioneering documentaries of a film unit headed by John Grierson. A new approach to mass-communication was developed further by the Secretary of the EMB, Stephen Tallents, when he was appointed the first Public Relations Officer of the General Post Office (catalogue nos. 30, 31) and by Jack Beddington, head of Publicity at Shell Mex and BP Ltd, for whom Kauffer designed his great series of lorry bills in the 1930s (catalogue nos. 26, 27, 28, 38, 39, 40). Another important association for Kauffer was with Peter Gregory, chairman of Lund Humphries Ltd. At the company's offices in Bedford Square Kauffer not only worked as unofficial Art Director – in a studio of legendary neatness – but also arranged the first exhibitions in England of two great original masters, Man Ray and Jan Tschichold, and of distinguished fellow-designers such as Hans Schleger and Lewitt-Him. At a time when genuine commitment to the innovations of the Modern Movement was rare Kauffer made a special contribution not only through his own work but through his activities in the Film Society, the British Surrealist Committee and as an outstanding exponent of the photomural in the 1930s.

His manifestation to the public in the extroverted gaiety of his '20s posters and the assertive masculinity of his '30s designs was complementary to his personality. He was a shy man who gave himself only to a small circle of private friends (among whom were T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley and Marianne Moore, to name the most illustrious). After his death in New York City in 1954 his friend Sir Colin Anderson described him this way: 'Like a slim, russet eagle in appearance . . . cultured, intelligent and hypersensitive, his fastidiousness eternally governed his surroundings, his comings and goings and his choice of company.' Designs that were sometimes enlarged to 20 foot widths originated, like all his work, in immaculately executed small millboard panels (catalogue nos. 8, 9) on which Kauffer worked standing up at an architect's desk. His poster career made him famous – there are several bulky volumes of his press-cuttings in the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York – and his career had something of the quality of a performance. Each new design that identified a product also identified him. He once compared the poster designer to a 'barker' outside a circus. In the 1920s the dry-cleaning firm of Eastman & Son (see catalogue nos. 13–16) actually issued a sticker which stated that 'A New Poster by E. McKnight Kauffer Will Be Shown Here Shortly'. In 1945 Kauffer designed a poster showing a clown's face with the legend 'Subway Posters Perform Daily Before Five Million Pairs of Eyes'. In this aspect of his work there surely lay a positive source of creative energy but the other was his embattled insistence that private values should not be denied in the shared public environment. With this ambition he exercised a powerful leadership when the present profession of graphic design was barely taking shape.

Kauffer's posters embrace an extraordinary variety of styles. His talent was receptive, expressing itself in creative adaptation rather than radical originality. He sometimes worked from the slightest of hints – for example, his 1922 Great Fire poster translates to poster scale and idiom a few square centimetres in a small orange and black woodcut by Edward Wadsworth, *Black Country, Blast Furnaces*, of which Kauffer himself owned a copy. From beginnings in the manner of Van Gogh, he moved to Fauvism, to Vorticism, to the style of the Ballet Russe, Art Déco in the mid-Twenties, Surrealism, Abstraction and the Functional graphic design approach of the Bauhaus. Only the range of his posters can be suggested in an exhibition of this size, but he was active in many fields. These included large murals, interior and exhibition design, stage-sets and costumes, tapestries and carpets, book illustration (particularly for the Nonesuch Press, also notably for Eliot's *Ariel Poems*), many designs for ephemeral printed material such as labels, packages, brochures and book jackets, and even – both in 1926 – a painted wooden sign board for Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop and the titles for Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Lodger*. Some of these are represented photographically in the exhibition. We acknowledge with gratitude the generosity of Mr Sidney Garrad and Mr Michael Darby in lending important works for the duration of the tour.

MARK HAWORTH-BOOTH

* This is reproduced on the catalogue cover and brought back into use as the poster for this exhibition. A copy was presented to the Museum in 1973 by Ogilvy Benson & Mather Ltd. At 10' 6" x 5' it is unfortunately too large to travel but can be consulted in the Print Room. Reproductions can be obtained from Publications Department at 59p inclusive of post and packing (price and availability accurate as at September 1973).

Note: Slides of all the exhibits are available from the National Slide Loan Service, Victoria and Albert Museum

Printed in England for Her Majesty's Stationery Office
by The Millbrook Press Limited, Southampton
Dd 133769 11/73

CATALOGUE

Photograph of Kauffer taken in 1922 at Evansville, Indiana, by Neal Walden: by courtesy of Evansville Museum of Arts and Science. Quotation from Kauffer's address to the Royal Society of Arts, 1938. Photograph of the *Early Bird*, E.35-1973, in the Department of Prints and Drawings.

1 In Watford
Colour lithograph, signed, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. in 1915. 30 x 20 in. E.4279-1915

2 Oxhey Woods
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1915, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 30 x 20 in. E.4278-1915

3 Reigate, Route 160
Colour lithograph, signed in monogram and dated 1915, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 30 x 20 in. E.449-1916

4 Winter Sale at Derry and Toms
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1919, published by Derry and Toms Ltd. 30 x 20 in. E.420-1920

5 Winter Sales are best reached by Underground
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1921, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 38 x 23 in. E.48-1922

6 Winter Sales are best reached by Underground
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1922, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 34½ x 21½ in. E.629-1923

7 Winter Sales are best reached by Underground
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1924, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 40 x 25 in. E.58-1926

8 Vigil – the Pure Silk
Gouache on millboard, signed and dated 1919. Original design for a poster published by Walker Brothers, of which a copy is in the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York (1963-39-18). 21½ x 15 in. Lent by S. A. Garrad, Esq. (Garrad loan, rot. no. 1)

9 London History at the London Museum
Gouache on millboard, signed and dated 1922. Original design for no. 10. 21½ x 14½ in. E.1-1924

10 London History at the London Museum
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1922, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 40 x 25 in. E.2-1924

11 London Museum of Practical Geology
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1921, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 34 x 18½ in. E.1088-1922

12 Museum of Natural History
Colour lithograph, signed, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. in 1923. 40 x 25 in. Circ.412-1971

13 London Dyers and Cleaners for over 100 years: Magic Dyers
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1921, published by Eastman & Son Ltd. 22½ x 16 in. E.624-1925

14 Since 1802 the London Dyers and Cleaners
Colour lithograph, signed, published by Eastman & Son Ltd. c. 1921. 22½ x 16 in. E.627-1925

15 Spring Cleaning: Eastman's, The London Dyers and Cleaners for 120 years
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1924, published by Eastman & Son Ltd. 22½ x 16 in. E.626-1925

16 Spring Cleaning and Dyeing
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1925, published by Eastman & Son Ltd. 22½ x 16 in. E.287-1926

17 Summertime Pleasures by Underground (Jack i' the Green)
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1925, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 40 x 25 in. E.1020-1925

18 Summertime in the Country
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1925, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 40 x 50 in. E.1022-1925

19 Summertime Pleasures by Underground (Pierrot)
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1925, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 40 x 25 in. E.1021-1925

20 From Winter's Gloom to Summer's Joy
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1927, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 40 x 25 in. Circ.408-1971

21 Cocoa
Gouache on paper, signed and dated 1927; original design for a poster published by the Empire Marketing Board. 29½ x 44½ in. E.331-1934

22 Power, the Nerve Centre of London's Underground
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1930, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 40 x 25 in. E.3338-1932

23 Play Between 6 and 12, the Bright Hours
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1930, published by the Underground Electric Railways Co. 40 x 25 in. E.1238-1931

24 Go Great Western to Devon's Moors
Colour lithograph, signed, published by the Great Western Railway in 1932. 40 x 25 in. Circ.403-1971

25 Great Western to Cornwall
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1932, published by the Great Western Railway. 40 x 25 in. Circ.401-1971

26 Ask for BP Ethyl
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1933, published by Shell-Mex BP Ltd. 30 x 45 in. Lent by S. A. Garrad, Esq. (Garrad loan, rot. no. 2)

27 Magicians Prefer Shell
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1934, published by Shell-Mex BP Ltd. 30 x 45 in. Circ.158-1968

28 BP Ethyl Controls Horsepower
Colour lithograph and process engraving, signed 'photo and design by E. McKnight Kauffer', published by Shell-Mex BP Ltd in 1933. 30 x 45 in. Circ.317-1971

29 Buckingham Palace from St James's Park
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1934, published by the London Passenger Transport Board. 40 x 25 in. Lent by S. A. Garrad, Esq. (Garrad loan, rot. no. 8)

30 Contact with the World, Use the Telephone
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1934, published by the General Post Office. 30 x 19½ in. Lent by S. A. Garrad, Esq. (Garrad loan, rot. no. 7)

31 Cheaper Empire Telegrams
Colour lithograph, signed E. McKnight Kauffer hon. RDI, published by the General Post Office c. 1938. 30 x 20 in. Circ.308-1971

32 Stop on India Non-Skid Tyres and feel the difference
Colour lithograph and process engraving, signed and dated 1935, published by the manufacturers of India Tyres. 29¼ x 19¼ in. Lent by S. A. Garrad, Esq. (Garrad loan, rot. no. 3)

33 Exhibition of Modern Silverwork
Colour lithograph with process engraving, signed, published by the London Passenger Transport Board in 1938. 30 x 20 in. Lent by S. A. Garrad, Esq. (Garrad loan, rot. no. 4)

34 Travel in Comfort by Imperial Airways
Colour lithograph and process engraving, signed, published by Imperial Airways c. 1935. 25¼ x 40 in. Lent by S. A. Garrad, Esq. (Garrad loan, rot. no. 5)

35 New Architecture Exhibition of the Elements of Modern Architecture
Colour lithograph, signed and dated 1937, published by the Mars Group. 30 x 20 in. Circ.316-1971

36 Spring in the Village
Colour lithograph with process engraving, signed (photograph by J. Dixon-Scott), published by the London Passenger Transport Board in 1936. 40 x 25 in. Lent by S. A. Garrad, Esq. (Garrad loan, rot. no. 6)

37 The Earl's Court Motor Show,
Colour lithograph with process engraving, signed, published by the London Passenger Transport Board in 1937. 40 x 25 in. Circ.327-1971

38 Lubrication by Shell (Miles-Whitney Straight aeroplane)
Colour lithograph with process engraving, signed and dated 1937, published by Shell-Mex BP Ltd. 30 x 45 in. Circ.577-1971

39 New Shell Lubrication Oils
Colour lithograph with silk screen, signed and dated 1937, published by Shell-Mex BP Ltd. 30 x 45 in. Circ.576-1971

40 TVO - Draw Bar Pull!
Colour lithograph, signed E. McKnight Kauffer Hon RDI, and dated 1938, published by Shell-Mex BP Ltd. 30 x 45 in. Circ.325-1971

41 Visit Your Museum: Natural History Museum
Proof of a colour litbograph, signed and dated 1939, commissioned by the London Passenger Transport Board but not issued because of the outbreak of war. 40 x 25 in. Lent by Michael Darby, Esq

DOCUMENTATION

a Sunflowers, oil painting 1917. Present whereabouts unknown. Repr. C. Marriott, *Modern Movements in Painting*, London, 1920

b Poetry Bookshop sign board, 1926. Painted for the premises opened at 38 Great Russell St., London. By Courtesy of Bertram Rota Ltd

c The Lodger, 1926. A title from the film directed by Alfred Hitchcock, titles edited by Ivor Montagu, produced by Gainsborough Pictures. By Courtesy of the British Film Institute

d Rug, 1929. Woven by Royal Wilton Carpets to Kauffer's design. Victoria and Albert Museum, Misc.2(23)-1934

e Post Office Station, 1930. Four posters by Kauffer at entrance, including catalogue no. 23. By Courtesy of London Transport

f Petrol pump filament, 1934. Designed for Shell-Mex but not used. By Courtesy of Shell-Mex BP Ltd

g Kauffer's studio, circa 1935. This is the studio at Lund Humphries Ltd, 12 Bedford Square, London. Photograph by courtesy of S. A. Garrad, Esq

h Photomural, 1935. From the entrance hall of Embassy Court, Brighton (architect Wells Coates). By courtesy of the *Architectural Review*

i Checkmate, 1938. Sets and costumes for the Bliss-de-Valois ballet in its 1971–72 revival by the Royal Ballet, Covent Garden. By courtesy of the Royal Ballet Company

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